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SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT

TUESDAY, JANUARY 29, 2008

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In Today's Papers

AKP-MHP Agree to Lift Headscarf Ban in Universities
All papers report the ruling AKP and opposition MHP reached agreement late on Monday on the details of a plan to remove the headscarf ban at universities. The two parties have agreed to change provisions in the Constitution and the Higher Education Board (YOK) Law to resolve the problem. There will be no direct references to clothing in the Constitution, and complementary changes will be made in the YOK law, Islamist-oriented Zaman says. The YOK Law amendment will describe the headscarf as a head covering wrapped around the head and tied in a knot under the chin without hiding the face. The AKP and MHP are to submit the headscarf reforms to the parliament for approval on Tuesday.

The AKP-MHP deal has sparked criticism from judges and university rectors. University rectors claim academic freedom and social harmony are threatened by moves to ease the headscarf ban. YOK Deputy Chair, Professor Isa Esme, said if the turban is allowed in universities, students who don't cover their heads would be pressured to cover their heads, and Turkey would face serious dangers. The rectors of Inonu, Karaelmas, and Sutcu Imam universities warned the government against 'polarizing' the nation. According to a statement from Inonu University in Malatya, "The turban has been turned into a political symbol that opposes the fundamental characteristics of the Republic, including secularism."

Islamist-oriented Yeni Safak says the AKP and MHP ended in just two hours the 'brutality' that has been going on for years. Under the headline "Fighting against the Regime," leftist-nationalist Cumhuriyet says the two parties have agreed to set free the turban, 'a symbol of political Islam.'

A commentary in tabloid Posta says the AKP should inspire trust with a pledge to guarantee the continuation of the secular regime and should speed up EU reforms. Another commentary in mainstream Milliyet opines about widespread concern that the freedom to wear a headscarf in universities could spread to elementary and secondary schools as well as state institutions.

Papers report the AKP administration has initiated an investigation against Hasan Balaman, the Mayor of Isparta, and Husnu Tuna, an MP from Konya, who have made 'provocative' statements to the effect that civil servants, mayors, and parliamentarians should also be free to cover their heads. Another AKP lawmaker, Nurettin Canikli, in turn said "We have no hidden agenda; our only goal is to resolve the problems in universities. We respect the sensitivities of CHP leader Deniz Baykal. We are ready to make adjustments to end such concerns." The pro-Kurdish DTP lawmaker Hasip Kaplan lashed out at the AKP for working to lift the headscarf ban while preparing to reintroduce official bans for the use of the Kurdish language in education.

On the other hand, Cumhuriyet carries a public opinion survey conducted by the "Ipsos KMG" company which shows 65 percent of interviewees believe the impact of religion will increase in daily life, and 56 percent think the impact of religion in the state administration will increase. The poll was conducted in 26 provinces with 1102 adults.

AKP's 'Turban Work' Delays Changes to Article 301
Milliyet, Vatan, Radikal and Zaman report the ruling AKP's bid to lift a ban on wearing the Islamic headscarf in universities has delayed an EU-sought reform of article 301 of the penal code, used to prosecute writers by making "insulting Turkishness" a crime. Mainstream Vatan claims the AKP has decided to postpone changes to article 301 to avoid tensions with the opposition MHP during the headscarf proceedings in the parliament. AKP deputy Nurettin Canikli told reporters the reform of 301 was still on the agenda.

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Train Crash Resulted by Lack of Maintenance

All papers report a court arrested three railroad workers on Monday in connection with the train crash that killed nine people near Kutahya early Sunday. Vatan and Cumhuriyet say the crash might have been due to the lack of maintenance of the rail system over the past 19 years. A railroad official said the crash site lacked the automatic error reporting system, TSI, which would have prevented the deaths. Experts reportedly said the accident might have been the result of metal fatigue. The opposition CHP has proposed a parliamentary investigation into the state of Turkish railroads.

Professor Yayla Sentenced for Insulting Ataturk

All papers report Professor Atilla Yayla of Ankara's Gazi University has been given a suspended 15-month prison sentence for insulting Ataturk. Yayla's sentence will be executed if he commits the same offense in a two-year probation period. In a speech he made at a 2006 panel in Izmir, Yayla said the era of Ataturk's single party rule from 1925-1945 did not signify progress in Turkey, and it was regressive in some respects. Yayla also said Europeans were asking why there are statues and pictures of Ataturk everywhere. Gazi University fired Yayla, but he was later reinstated.

Investigations against DTP, Kurdish Writer

Radikal, Zaman, Taraf and Yeni Safak report the Diyarbakir Prosecutor's Office has launched an investigation into the pro-Kurdish DTP congress held in the city over the weekend which was attended by the party co-chairperson Emine Ayna, lawmaker Akin Birdal, Mayor Osman Baydemir, and Siirt provincial party head Murat Avci. Ayna told the congress implementation of Abdullah Ocalan's 'democratic confederation' formula could resolve the Kurdish problem in the region.

Meanwhile, Yeni Safak reports Kurdish writer Orhan Miroglu faces investigation under article 301 over an article he wrote for the leftist daily Taraf, in which Miroglu said from 1990-1995, Kurdish women were kept in gendarme stations in southeast Turkey for months and were raped by Turkish soldiers.

EDITORIAL OPINION:

"The Turban Debate is the Result of July 22 Elections" Murat Yetkin wrote in liberal Radikal (1/29): "PM Erdogan was encouraged by the electoral support the AKP received during the July 22 elections. Thinking that he may not get this kind of support again, he decided to act immediately on the turban issue. AKP supporters prevented protests against the turban ban in order to avoid any trouble between the PM and the judiciary, the opposition and the military. During his election speech, PM Erdogan promised to treat each segment of the public equally. But how could we expect PM Erdogan to open his arms equally to Kurds, Alevis and Greek Orthodox, and then ignore the crowds who voted him to power? In addition, military-government relations were rather painful prior to the July 22 elections. But with Gul as president and the AKP in control of parliament, tensions eased. After all, the military needed some breathing room in order to formulate a response to PKK terrorism. Therefore, the turban issue and the start of the active fight against the PKK terrorism are the direct results of the July 22 elections. Therefore, one would be naieve to believe that PM Erdogan would put anything else on the agenda concerning the EU (i.e. lifting article 301) before the headscarf issue."

"Why Are the Ones Who are Scared of Turban not Scared of Injustice?"

Leyla Ipekci wrote in Islamist-oriented Zaman (1/29): "I have difficulty understanding people who use the turban issue to increase tensions in Turkey, especially while there are so many dangerous gangs operating actively. When the government criticized the headscarf ban in the universities, certain circles screamed that the regime was changing in Turkey and arranged street protests and

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chanted slogans against the AKP government. It is hard to understand why some people are causing tension by using the turban issue to say the secular regime is changing. Turkey should focus on other issues, such as unsolved murders, changes to article 301, and the Kurdish problem."

"An Open Letter to the PM"

Oktay Eksi commented in the mainstream Hurriyet (1/29): "Mr Prime Minister, even though you claim that the July 22 election results did not go to your head, unfortunately, you are acting like the Democrat Party leaders following the 1954 elections. Under the influence of the AKP victory, you began to polarize people instead of seeking consensus. You started heated debates regarding the turban issue. But, I am telling you that you will cause huge problems in Turkey. As a friend, I am kindly warning you that neither you nor Turkey will be able to sort out such problems. Don't you know that once you open this door, you won't be able to close it? Can't you see that this issue will not affect only you, but will be a disaster for all of us? Don't you have any friends?"

TV News:

NTV

Domestic News

- A court in Gaziantep arrested nineteen out of 25 al-Qaeda suspects on Monday. On January 24, one police officer was killed and four others were injured in an operation against al-Qaeda members in the city.

- The southeastern city of Batman's Agriculture Department said no bird flu virus was found in the 200 birds that were found dead in the region.

- A 70-year old man had a heart attack during prayers in a mosque in the eastern city of Erzurum, but the Imam and fellow believers did not help him until they finished their prayers. The man died from the heart attack.

International News

- Deputy Chief of the Turkish General Staff (TGS), General Ergin

Saygun, traveled to the US on Monday for Turkey-US High Level Defense Group talks. In Washington, Saygun will also hold talks with the US Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General James Cartwright, to discuss cooperation in the fight against the PKK.

- President Ahmadinejad is to visit Iraq in less than two months, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said on Monday.

- For the first time in 30 years, Egypt and Iran appear to be moving closer to reestablishing full diplomatic ties.

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